

QUINNEBASSET GIRLS.

BY

SOPHIE MAY,
*Author, *Prudy's Dimple Stories**
AUTHOR OF "THE ASBURY TWINS," "OUR HELEN," "THE DOCTOR'S
DAUGHTER," "LITTLE PRUDY STORIES," "DOTTY
DIMPLE STORIES," "LITTLE PRUDY'S
FLYAWAY STORIES," ETC.

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QUINNEBASSET GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

"SOLOMON'S LITTLE GIRL."

DARKNESS was coming on in the wake of a driving storm; and Captain Howe laughed as he heard the wind howl and the lilac-bushes scrape against the west windows. His wife had been talking all the month about "a dry season," and this was what came of it.

"A pretty wet drouth of yours, mother!" said he, lighting his pipe, "wetter than you commonly get it. I call it the line storm."

She only smiled, and turned the seam in her knitting. There was no lamp lighted, but as the firelight flickered over her you could see she was a pretty little old lady, with a narrow forehead and delicate features, set off by a gay cap. And you could see that he was a large man in a figured dressing-gown, with a bald peak on the top of his head, and a thin queue of gray hair falling picturesquely down his neck.

"I suppose this rain has belated the stage, mother, or Charles would be along with the mail. You know I'm looking for a letter from Solomon."

Solomon was the captain's youngest son, but not Madam Howe's. Madam Howe was a second wife, and had been married only ten years.

"Solomon? Why, he wrote a little while ago."

"Yes, but you know what a hard time he was having then, mother, and I want to hear again."

"What was the matter with him?" asked Madam Howe coolly. "I saw the letter, but I didn't read it clear through, for Solomon does n't write a very eligible hand."

"*Legible*, my dear."

"Well, legible, then; but anyway, it's bad to read. What was the matter with him, and where was he moving to? He is a perfect rolling stone."

"He wasn't clear where he *should* go when he wrote," replied Captain Howe, trotting his foot. He had often called Solomon a rolling stone himself, but it sounded a great deal worse when his wife said it.

"Let's see, father, how many children has Solomon?"

"Four."

"And his wife is shiftless?"

"Why, no, my dear, Caroline is sickly."

Madam Howe smiled as if she understood the case better than any one else. "Oh! I know," said she, "*she calls* herself sickly. She is one of the imaginary kind, I suppose."

"You mean *imaginative*, mother."

The bald peak on the captain's head almost blushed as he spoke. He considered his little wife a very superior woman, but she did make sad havoc with the English language sometimes.

"No, I mean *whimmy* and fussy ; that's what I've always heard of Solomon's wife, ever since I came into the family, and I'm sure I'm sorry for Solomon," said Madam Howe, looking about as sympathetic as the gray cat.

"Well, I'm sorry for him, too," said Captain Howe, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the andiron. "I don't know but he'll have to break up again now, and take a fresh start."

Madam Howe yawned a little.

"Well," said she, "they won't any of them mind it much, I suppose, they're so used to breaking up. What will they do with the children? She'll take them to her father's in Cambridge, won't she, most likely?"

"Maybe so. Ahem!" replied the captain, hesitating. "You know there *was* something said about the oldest girl's coming here."

"First that ever *I* heard of it, father! You don't mean to say!"

"Why, Solomon mentioned it a year ago, mother; I told you at the time."

"Well, I don't know but I do have some recollection, now you speak of it, but I wasn't consulted in the least. Let's see; was the girl's name Emily? How old a child?"

"About fourteen, I should say. When they moved from Dead River she couldn't have been more than two, and they were here a couple of years; left just before we were married. She was a cute little thing, and I'd like to see her again."

Madam Howe had puckered her lips together very tightly by this time, — a sign that her husband might as

well stop talking ; but he did not happen to look at her, so went on recklessly,—

" And it struck me all of a sudden, mother, as we've been sitting here this evening, whether or no Solomon's folks would n't want to make some kind of an arrangement about sending Emily here to go to the academy."

No answer, except the click of Madam Howe's knitting-needles, which varied no more than the ticking of the tall clock in the corner.

" We have room enough, mother. Only you and I and Charles and Hester. We might have her come awhile as well as not."

Click, clack, tick, tack, went the needle and the clock ; and the lilac-bushes scraped against the window. Madam Howe's ears were good enough ; it was her mind that was deaf, sometimes. She kept a sort of trap-door in her brain, which she could let down at a moment's notice ; and when it was down her husband either had to stop talking or address his remarks to the cat.

" Girls of that age can be quite a help if they're a mind to," said he, drawing out the brass andirons, and letting the brands fall apart. " He had a fixed habit of raking the fire at eight o'clock, and then building a second fire upon the ruins. The effect was dismal enough, and if Madam Howe had had any nerves they would have quivered when she heard that shovel.

" You see it gives us a good bed of coals for next morning, and saves matches," said Captain Howe, kindling the second fire, and munching gingerbread while it was trying to burn.

It was what he always said ; and he thought himself a pattern of economy for managing so well with the fire, and for picking up crooked pins and wearing them on his coat-sleeve.

"Charles has n't brought in enough kindling-wood," said he, opening the cupboard door at the left of the fireplace.

Just as he had laid a maple-stick across the andirons there was a sound of wheels.

"Can't be the stage," exclaimed he, accidentally hitting the stick with his crutch, and putting out the fire.

The room was in total darkness now. Before Madam Howe could rise and strike a match, the stage drove up to the gate with a tipsy flourish, and there was a driver's loud "Whoa!"

The sound struck like a knell on Captain Howe's heart. He knew as well as he wanted to know, and a great deal better, that his grand-daughter Emily Howe had arrived.

To be sure, in answer to Solomon's last letter he had only said,—

"Manage as well as you can with your family, my son, and remember your old father is always ready to do what he can for you."

If that was asking his grand-daughter to come and go to school, why, then he had asked her, and must take the consequences. Old as he was, Grandpa Howe did do imprudent things sometimes, for he was naturally hospitable, and could n't always remember that his saw-mill was burned last year, and he was now a poor man. His wife was rich, but he had never touched a cent of her money, and never meant to do it.

Madam Howe opened the outside door. She had quite forgotten "Solomon's folks," and was on the point of saying warmly, "Why, Elder Drinkwater, how do you do? We thought you'd be here some time this week!"

But instead of looking up at tall Elder Drinkwater, she looked down about an inch or so upon the wistful face of a little girl, framed in a waterproof hood.

"Who is it? Won't you come in out of the rain?"

"I'm Emily Howe," said a trembling young voice. "I thought you'd be expecting me; papa said you would."

"Oh! Solomon's little girl! And did you bring that big trunk?"

That was all she said, every single word; but her tone was as wintry as the March wind, and poor Emily shivered from head to foot.

By that time Grandpa Howe had got to the door with his crutch, and caught the little wet creature in his arms, giving her a hugging and kissing that surprised her almost as much as her grandmother's coldness.

"Come up to the fire, dear, and dry your feet. Well, well, the fire has gone out, I declare; but here's Charles at last. Quick, Charles, get us some kindlings. So your father concluded to break up, and send you here, bless your little heart! Solomon's oldest girl, mother, named for my first wife! And this is your pretty grandmother, Emily, that you never saw before. She's going out now, and she'll steep you some ginger tea, piping hot."

She did not look as if she would. She took Emily's

wet wraps, which her husband gave her, and carried them into the kitchen ; and as the door closed after her, the little stranger fell on her grandfather's neck, and sobbed out,—

“ Oh, I'm afraid papa didn't write the letter to you after all ! I don't believe you knew I was coming ! ”